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ABSTRACT

The first duty of the educator is to forecast enrollments as accurately as possible, using the best means available. The second is to begin planning long in advance of a school closure or major reorganization. Watchwords of successful management for the years of dwindling enrollment are communication and community participation. Communication with teachers, pupils, parents, and anyone else whose interests are affected by the changes to come is crucial to any measure of success. Moreover, the participation of all those affected is essential. It will be necessary to glean their ideas and cooperation to be certain that decisions affecting the community are acceptable to the community. Taken positively, the implications of declining enrollments are that enterprising and creative school administrators will develop better programs as they condense them. They will devise equitable reduction-in-force policies with the teachers' unions and will become even more prominent as public leaders when they unite with community task forces to solve the problems of school closings. (Author)

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SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

DIGEST

Implications of Declining Enrollments for Schools

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FOREWORD

Both the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management are pleased to continue the *School Leadership Digest*, with a second series of reports designed to offer school leaders essential information on a wide range of critical concerns in education.

The *School Leadership Digest* is a series of monthly reports on top priority issues in education. At a time when decisions in education must be made on the basis of increasingly complex information, the *Digest* provides school administrators with concise, readable analyses of the most important trends in schools today, as well as points up the practical implications of major research findings.

By special cooperative arrangement, the series draws on the extensive research facilities and expertise of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. The titles in the series were planned and developed cooperatively by both organizations. Utilizing the resources of the ERIC network, the Clearinghouse is responsible for researching the topics and preparing the copy for publication by NAESP.

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INTRODUCTION

> Shrinkage and how to cope with it have become as much a theme of the seventies as growth was for the forties and fifties.
>
> *Sargent*

There was a time when it seemed the most desirable abilities a school administrator could have were to raise money in school bond issues and to find ways to fit more pupils into less space. The schools burgeoned with youngsters, and new buildings sprang up throughout suburbia. World War II did for education what it did for the gross national product: it precipitated greater and greater quantities—of pupils, teachers, administrators, and buildings.

The difficulties faced by administrators were often acute, but they nearly always came down to the same problem, whether of finances or facilities: how to get *more*. Constant as this need may have been, it became a familiar one. Moreover, it was the sort of need least likely to seriously irritate Americans; for even before the economic and population boom of the forties and fifties, our collective habit of mind had been to value growth in any human enterprise. From the beginning of colonization on this continent, the men who have received the highest praise a nation can bestow—adoption into legend and folk tradition—acted toward the common goals of exploration and expansion.

And for 27 consecutive years, through the fall of 1970, growth was an operating assumption of modern education. In that year the total enrollment in regular elementary and secondary day schools peaked at 51 million students. In 1973 there were 50 million, and in 1974, 49.7 million. That year also saw the smallest number of births since 1945, leading forecasters to predict that by 1980 four million *fewer* public school students will be enrolled. (These figures are taken from Simon and Frankel's publication.)

Such a decline affects more than school management

tactics. After all, the managing tacticians are human and have grown up physically and professionally giving some degree of credence, like the rest of us, to the goals of exploration and expansion. Not only do they have a duty to change tactics, but also they have a right to feel a little shocked. Basic assumptions are not easily dismissed.

Still, the fact is that different and in many ways new administrative aptitudes must be found to deal with the problems created when enrollment decline is significant and steady. The literature on the subject suggests that the problems can be handled positively and successfully. Even the ultimate result of decreased enrollment in a school district, the closing of a neighborhood school, can be the occasion for creative school and community involvement. Exploration may be made into the skills and tools that make education more efficient. Expansion may be possible in more varied educational programs.

FORECASTING ENROLLMENT

The decline in birthrate is a national phenomenon, but it does not affect all school districts equally. The reason, as the 1970 census reveals, is demographic. Young families moved out of the Southeast at a rate faster than average. Nevada experienced a 33 percent increase in number of people under five years of age, whereas South Dakota showed a 35 percent drop in this group. The Northeast and the West gained 1 percent in the under-20 age group, the young parents of the next two decades; but Hawaii lost 4 percent of them. And even within regions and states the fluctuations can be of crucial importance to school boards trying to forecast enrollment patterns.

The point is, as Decker writes, that declining enrollment is *random*. Some states generally, and any district almost anywhere, may experience an increase in enrollment. Decker describes two other characteristics of declining enrollment: it is *progressive*, and it is *continuing*. It progresses up the grades in a wave-like pattern. If lower than usual numbers enrolled in kindergarten in 1968, then the seventh grades are experiencing that low for the first time this year. The wave of low enrollments will take years to work through the system. It is continuing because not just one year is involved, but all the years afterward until about 1980, when projections indicate a slight increase in K-8 enrollment. In other words, the first wave has opened up a trough that will probably not be refilled in the foreseeable future.

Because enrollment decline is random, many writers suggest that it is especially important for local boards to gauge accurately the future of their own districts. Besides the various forecasting methods and models available, there are a number of indicators that should be studied carefully at the district level.

Indicators of Declining Enrollment

Indications of the likelihood of enrollment increase or decline can be gleaned from school records, from demographic data compiled by county and city planning departments, from zoning and land-use plans, from realtors, and from the plans of businesses that employ great numbers of people in the area. Several recent articles by Brunetti, Keough, and Leggett offer useful checklists of indicators of local enrollment trends.

Indicators in the schools include declining kindergarten enrollments and greater breathing space appearing in elementary classrooms as average class sizes decrease. Two other factors that may affect enrollments are integration and the migration of students from financially strapped parochial schools.

Community indicators are primarily economic. If suburban homes are too expensive for young families to buy or rent or if homeowners are keeping their homes after their children have gone through the local schools, few new kindergarten or elementary students will enroll. Furthermore, if no new residential developments, transit lines, or state highways are planned, the neighborhood may be headed for a static or decreasing population. Although these types of indicators can hint at changes in school enrollments, more specific prediction methods must be used to come to a realistic forecast.

Sources of Methods and Models

If the convenience of having accurate forecasts were not enough to spur a school board to its greatest efforts, the necessities that depend on such projections should be. The short-range prediction, up to five years in the future, is the basis for budgeting, for teacher and staff allocations, and for the development of busing programs. Long-range plans, from 10 to 25 years, are required by law in some states. Long-range development plans are especially crucial to financially troubled urban school systems. School administrators everywhere carry the responsibility to inform the public about needs for staff and facilities and to prepare for the problems associated with

expansion or with school closure.

Statisticians and demographers have produced a variety of methods and models for predicting enrollment figures. Unfortunately, not one of them is perfect. The best results cannot be obtained by use of a model alone, but by a combination of methods and a thorough knowledge of the community characteristics.

The method that turns up most frequently in the literature on declining enrollment is the cohort-survival technique. This method works by measuring the percentage of newborns in a given year who enroll in kindergarten five years later. If in 1970, for example, 100 babies are born in a district and, in 1975, 95 enroll in kindergarten, then the ratio for predicting kindergarten enrollments for any year would be 95 percent of the live births five years previously. It is best to obtain the figures for a four- or five-year period and average the percentages. This method is used in the same way to determine retention ratios, or the percentage of pupils in one grade who progress to the next grade in the subsequent year. In his article entitled "Early Warning Signs of an Enrollment Drop," Keough cautions that this method is most reliable during periods of steady growth, which may rule it out for many districts.

The purpose here is not to review all the techniques, but to indicate where they are explained and described. A handy source is Wright's annotated bibliography of books and articles on enrollment forecasting techniques. At the end of his introductory discussion of the material, Wright lists three conditions suggested by Ireland for the most effective and beneficial use of enrollment forecasts. First, "know the community and its uniqueness." Then, "apply an appropriate forecasting model regularly and often." Finally, "consider accepting probabilities as effective results."

Political Complications

If those three strictures were all there is to forecasting enrollment, then education professionals would have a

clear-cut, however difficult, job to do. But there is more to it than that. As Fascione and Herron explain, special interest groups can affect school district plans. Although most of the writers surveyed praise efforts by administrators to involve the community in some way in school planning, everyone shudders at the occasional energetic watch-dog committee whose first priority is to strip school budgets and programs down to the bare bones.

In its desire to reduce the school budget, the committee may favor using enrollment projection techniques that yield the lowest figures. The lower the projected enrollment, the less the needed space will be. Worse, these groups may fail to consider the different needs of small areas within the district. What space is allotted, the authors say, may include all existing space, regardless of age, condition, or flammability.

Lest it seem that Fascione and Herron are hunting witches, they caution readers about pressure from other sources. First, a local PTA wants an excessive share of the limited budget to go to their school, perhaps at the expense of schools located in politically weaker areas. Second, priorities established by the budget office may conflict with administrators' desires to assign qualified teachers in sufficient numbers. Third, principals hope for funds and staff enough to carry out their plans. And fourth, the teachers' union wants to keep all its members employed. Clearly, some of these groups are more harmful than others to accurate forecasting and adequate planning. But paying too much attention to any one of them could skew not only the equitability of a district's allocations for its schools but the accuracy of its forecasts as well.

Like it or not, professional educators will not be left alone to do their job unhindered. Every aspect of education—its funding, management, and programs—not only is open to public scrutiny but is the object of emotional value as well.

PREPARING FOR A CUTBACK

A warning is the first line of defense against the results of declining enrollment. Just knowing it is in the wind cushions the shock when it hits. Better than that, some writers advise, a school district can prepare itself years in advance of a significant enrollment decline.

One interesting suggestion comes in a 1974 article by Eisenberger, who notes that the crux of the planning effort is the school board itself. If board members and their immediate administrative personnel learn to work together smoothly and regularly, then when they are faced by a crisis, as a school closure or a reduction in force (RIF) of personnel is usually perceived to be, they will be able to bridge the problem without incidental difficulties caused by inexperience. Eisenberger suggests that simulated school district crises, like war games, could both ease tensions among members and sharpen efficiency by allowing them to coordinate their "actions in a relatively short period of time over an item from which personal involvement has been largely removed." The group might practice analyzing hypothetical crises in their own districts or study the cases of other districts.

More advice comes from Brunetti, who writes that comprehensive planning for a declining enrollment should include the same components as planning for an increasing enrollment, but with an emphasis on consolidation or reduction of programs. First, establish educational priorities. Second, compare these priorities to the current state of programs, curriculum, staffing, and organization. Third, look for enrollment trends by analyzing statistics, demographic characteristics, land-use planning in the district, and so forth. From what is learned up to this point, the fourth consideration is to decide whether the school district will need more or fewer facilities, and how the existing ones might best be used. Then, fifth, make a plan for the development, implementation,

and financing of the programs, facilities, and services the district will need. Sixth and last, establish a recurring systematic review of the master plan.

Pupils and Programs

If enrollment declines enough, programs will almost inevitably have to be eliminated. Reduction of programs can be approached from either a negative or a positive point of view, as Brunetti points out. No one likes to lose services like transportation, duplicating, curriculum consultation, after-school sports, or the benefits of school nurses and clerks. But now may be a good time to review and perhaps redo the management of some schools or programs, or even of the entire school district. New priorities can more easily be established now, and new methods of organizing and managing instituted. If enrollment decline has not yet forced a major review of the district programs, a reform plan can be prepared now and implemented as numbers of pupils decrease.

A frequent result of withered enrollment is the transfer of students from one school to another. Pupils finding themselves in a new environment, with perhaps unfamiliar curriculum and teaching methods, may have difficulty performing at their best. Eisenberger and Keough, in their respective 1975 journal articles, suggest that if curricula were integrated districtwide and provision made for continuity between programs, some transition problems could be avoided. Long before a transfer becomes necessary, information on curriculum content in the schools could be gathered and analyzed, so students could be adequately prepared scholastically for transfer to a new school.

Extracurricular activities are also important to students and their parents. Ideally, students will find similar programs to join after being transferred to a new school. Record-keeping systems should be made uniform throughout the district and reviewed frequently, so transfer of records will be a simple process. Keough advises that more fully descriptive records on students should be prepared before a transfer.

Although many elementary schools already have had to grapple with the results of a decrease in numbers, most high schools have as many as eight years of grace. The preparations that apply to elementary school programs are largely true for those in high schools, with the complication that special or elective programs in secondary education are more costly and sophisticated than those in the lower grades. It would be wise to carefully review projected enrollment for a district before expanding elective programs requiring, in Keough's phrase, "esoterically trained personnel or exotic facilities." He further advises the school board to consider using "outside, contracted services to meet career education or career opportunity training program needs."

Finances

One of the most onerous results of dwindling enrollment is the concomitant decline in state aid, if (as is usual) that aid is given on the basis of enrollment or attendance. A school district's costs simply do not decrease in a one-to-one ratio to its enrollment. Little if any savings, for example, can be realized in the areas of food services, maintenance, and operations until one or two schools are actually closed. Besides salary increases for all employees, says Sealey, the following costs are typical of those that will not soon abate:

> Transportation is a good example. It doesn't cost any less to put 50 students on a bus than it costs to put 70 students on a bus. So until you can reduce entire bus runs, you will not make a great deal of savings in transportation. The same thing is true in food services, where it doesn't cost a great deal more to make 130 lunches than it does to make 100. It doesn't cost any less for a custodian to sweep a room that has 23 students in it than one that has 30 students in it. It still takes 18 minutes.

Also, inflation means that the remaining costs will persistently increase. It will be the task of school boards and superintendents to win public sympathy and understanding about the continuing financial needs of a slowly depopulating school district.

Realities such as these add urgency to the efforts of those who are exploring alternative means of financing education. Meanwhile, a local board's recourse is the well-drawn plan. In her 1975 article Eisenberger suggests that projected capital expenditures should be compiled for each school building in the district and that the figures should include the costs of renovation. Effective financial management depends upon having the most accurate enrollment projections possible. Both Brunetti and Arveson warn that if far more students are planned for than actually enroll, the financial result may be a ruinous combination of overstaffing and the loss of anticipated and budgeted funds from the state.

Personnel

The greatest share of the budget, of course, goes for staff salaries. Obviously, some teachers will have to be released. Little wonder that job security is becoming as big a topic in contract negotiations as salary has been. It is imperative to balance two noble impulses: to be fair to the teachers as a group and as individuals, and to maintain the highest quality of education.

Forced termination is to be avoided whenever possible. It may be helpful to project staff attrition rates a few years to get an idea about just how many teachers will be left as enrollment declines. Normal attrition and early retirement incentive programs, however, may not reduce the staff enough. In his 1975 journal article, Keough reports that some planners have placed a moratorium on teacher leaves, "thus reducing the number of teachers returning to claim positions vacated when enrollments were higher." Another alternative is to offer "one or two-year termination contracts to new teachers, thereby allowing the district to declare openly that teaching positions may not be available in the immediate future."

The "last hired, first fired" approach to decreasing staff numbers, however, could be harmful to the quality of education. First, it would get rid of younger people wholesale,

rather than according to competence. Second, it would be regressive socially: the ethnic imbalance that has recently been partially rectified among teachers as well as elsewhere in the country would be resumed. Third, it could wipe out some special programs, like bilingual instruction, that are now deemed necessary.

In many states, legal constraints block school boards from taking their pick of their teachers and releasing the rest. But seniority rights are being reconsidered in California, for example, to allow local boards to retain teachers of newer programs while cutting back on staff. The state legislature is being made to see as well that local boards cannot keep paying all the teachers when reduced enrollment curtails state funds, according to a special report entitled "The Spectre of Declining Enrollment."

Whenever a board is considering reduced staffing, it should seek legal advice to make sure it follows due process in dealing with its employees. At such a time, open communication with all employee unions can alleviate part of the strain. If teachers are given a fair hearing when the board is considering RIF maneuvers, a fair policy may be achieved.

The Educational Research Service collected examples of RIF policies from 16 school districts, analyzed them, and came up with an extensive checklist of points to be considered when devising a policy. Briefly, it suggests points to consider while favoring tenured full-time faculty. The district must comply with state law and its own agreements with the teachers' union to determine timing and order of layoffs. Seniority rights before, during, and after a period of layoffs must be established in detail, as must rehire provisions, grievance procedures, and retirement status. Other problems that, according to the checklist, should be solved include racial imbalance among the teaching staff, "bumping" rights, substitute teaching, and job training.

CLOSING A SCHOOL: THE COMMUNITY CARES

As many school administrators have learned the hard way, the closing of a neighborhood school can become the hottest political issue of the year. Reactions to such an event can be deep and long-lasting. Although to some parents closure of the local school means no more than the inconvenience of having their children bused farther away from home, for the vocal others it means much more.

In her article on "Closing a School," Eisenberger has written eloquently about the emotional import of a school closure.

> When parents block school closings they are not fighting to save a building but to preserve a unique personal investment. . . . The staunchest school supporter and greatest educational advocate is the parent who has spent long years building a good reputation in the local schools. When parents view local school closings, what they see is the threat of losing this investment and having to begin all over again the process of building reputation, influence and acceptance in a new school.

When a school closing is being discussed, parents whose children are affected seem to pay more attention to administrators' attitudes than to the financial reasons. "Superintendents have been dismissed," Eisenberger says, "because they viewed the issue as a 'nuts-and-bolts' problem instead of a 'people problem'." Not less involved are the students and teachers who are to be transferred. In all cases, the crucial personal problem is that of adjusting to the new environment; it is that of regaining some measure of "reputation, influence and acceptance." By allowing these interested groups to be active partners in the process of closing a school, the board can do better than just avoid harsh criticism; it can tap a rich reserve of creative decision-making and public goodwill.

Adjusting to the Change

To help students, teachers, and principals adjust to a new school, Eisenberger suggests a program of visitations. A

"professional development exchange program" might begin two years before a school must be closed. The teacher to be transferred could exchange classes for a few days or a week with the opposite teacher. The program would acquaint teachers with the new routine and the new faculty, among whom they could begin to form friendships. Students also benefit from visits to other schools, and so do their parents. If the new school seemed acceptable to a student when his class exchanged rooms for a day with a counterpart class, then he and his parents will be able to accept a permanent change more easily.

Eisenberger suggests these steps be taken by a superintendent who desires a smooth transfer for his or her teachers and principals. First, set up professional meetings among the concerned principals. Second, arrange for the "new" principal to see the transferring teachers operating in their own milieu. Third, provide for intervisitations and cross-observations. Fourth, set up districtwide staff meetings. And fifth, arrange separate meetings among art, music, and special teachers and their transferring counterparts.

It will also be necessary to go to some lengths to help concerned parents adjust to the change. Especially those active in the PTA may be interested in neighborhood coffee hours for parents and administrators to discuss the closure and related topics informally. A central council of concerned PTAs can share ideas and plans. Well-oiled channels of communication among the PTA groups, including the introduction of leaders to each other, would help. And parents might also be invited to attend the other PTA meetings.

The Task Force

When the school board or the superintendent announces that enrollment is bound to decline and that something may have to be done about it, active and vocal parents may present plenty of challenge. Several educators say that this is the group to invite to join a task force to study the problem and present alternative solutions. From the beginning, they

advise, allow interested parents access to correct information. Alongside the PTA leaders and representatives of teachers, principals, administrators, and perhaps students, these parents will form the hub of communication between the school professionals and the community. The writers believe that all interested groups should be represented on the task force. Besides those mentioned, the ethnic and racial variety of the community should be reflected, and there should be women community leaders as well as businessmen, fathers as well as mothers.

The task force is a special advisory council to the school board. It is the link between the board and the people. One of its first duties is to provide the local news media with honest reports of its purpose and progress as it pursues its studies and begins to make recommendations. This kind of approach to the media is politically advisable. Since school issues are often hot news locally, newspeople will snoop around to get the inside story if they are not given the case in good faith as it stands. If a news story implies that it is hard to get information out of the task force, the people at home may think it has something to hide. Off-the-record discussions with responsible newspeople will in the long run contribute to full explanations of task force recommendations in the media.

Several duties of a task force stand out as particularly important. First, the task force should become thoroughly familiar with the methods and indicators that were used to predict future enrollments. In some districts, the task force itself forecasts enrollments. Second, the task force should visit each school and rate it against the others in terms of it educational adequacy. Sealey, superintendent of a district that closed a school, writes that when his task force members visited the school they answered "questions that were directly related to the programs available, as well as space needed for those programs. They looked at operating costs, determining which costs would transfer to another school if pupils were to change schools, and which costs could be eliminated if the building were closed or used for an alternative

use." They looked at present and projected enrollments, and space available now or in the future. They also analyzed safety factors of the school, including walking and busing routes. Noise and industrial pollution were also considered.

Third, the task force is responsible for establishing criteria for closing any school. Keough suggests, in his 1975 article, that some of the criteria should concern "academic excellence attained by the student body at that school; enrollment projections for the neighborhood it serves; location of the facility relative to schools that are functioning at near-normal capacity; operating costs; flexibility of the facility to meet changing program needs; [and] transportation costs." Others consider the availability of special education classes also.

Fourth, the task force should then recommend which schools should be closed first and in what order when and if closure becomes necessary. Finally, when closure is certain, the task force may survey the community's needs to make recommendations on future use of the vacated buildings. It should research legal constraints, zoning regulations, and so forth if it decides to sell or lease the building out of the school system.

Scenario for a School Closure

What follows is a concentrated amalgamation of the experiences of Sealey and Arveson (both superintendents) and Kelley (a principal), and of the recommendations of many other writers. Perhaps not every step would prove equally viable or useful in any particular school district, but taken together they offer the most positive way to handle the closing of a neighborhood school.

The school board has studied its district's enrollment projections for the next decade and decided that enrollment is going to drop. In a few years the decline will probably be significant enough to make one or more school closings seem economical. Together with the superintendent, they inform the community that cutbacks loom in the future and set up a task force that represents all aspects of the community and

all interested parties. The duties of the task force are those described in the preceding section. To learn public opinion on the questions of pointed debate, the task force hires professional pollsters and conducts telephone interviews.

At least two years before closure becomes necessary, the task force has isolated candidate schools and worked out the basic logistics for transportation, program continuity, and so forth in each case. The community is informed of these via parent newsletters and the local press, and public hearings are held at each candidate school for the superintendent, the board, and the task force to explain the rationale for their choices. These hearings, of course, are advertised throughout the district and covered by the news media. Since it is their local principal to whom parents most often turn for guidance in matters of school administration, the principals of the concerned schools send the affected parents invitations to the hearings. The principals also serve as informal ombudsmen from parent to school board during this time.

At the hearings, community opinion is considered respectfully, even though much of the initial reaction is negative. After the hearings the administration and task force reconvene to make their final recommendation to the school board. This decision is again widely publicized and newsletters are sent to parents. In this communication each parent is invited to attend another public hearing before the board's final decision.

Barring the introduction of unforeseen evidence against the proposal, the decision on which school or schools to close is made final by the board. And the principals' pace picks up. Principals of receiving schools send invitations to parents to visit, attend PTA meetings, meet the teachers, and find out how materials and programs their children have been using will be incorporated in the new school.

Meanwhile the transferring students are taken to their new school on a class exchange. Teachers are also given a few days' experience in the receiving school. The principal of the receiving school acquires the records of new students and staff. In the closing school, inventories must be made. The future of teachers and other staff members has to be decided.

ALTERNATIVES TO CLOSURE

Since enrollment will probably decline gradually, there may be a few years of increased elbowroom in the schools before closure becomes a clear necessity. And, of course, school closings are not preordained for every district where enrollment declines. The variety of uses that educators have found for facilities, whether vacant or just sparsely populated, suggests that the right use for any building is an individual decision based on the peculiar character and needs of the community.

In any case, the public ought to have a say in the disposal of a neighborhood school, especially if it is to leave the control of the school system. Sealey's task force promised to meet again with the people whose school was closed if the building were to be considered for some alternative use. Better, perhaps, would be an assignment to the task force to set up priorities for the disposal of closed school buildings and of those that are going to be only partially occupied by public school classes. If the possibilities are considered ahead of time, Sargent suggests, faulty last-minute decisions will be avoided.

Sargent reports that in Boston the Public Facilities Department, which is responsible for funding and construction of most public buildings in the city, acts rather like "an official landlord for the city." When a school is vacated (usually an older one to which the city has clear title), the school board "declares the property surplus and it is turned over to the department. The department can immediately designate use, according to neighborhood needs. No waiting, no red tape, no middleman; the department is its own broker."

But empty classrooms do not at first signify school closings. The slack space can be used to eliminate double sessions and portable classrooms and to provide room to revive programs that had been crowded out. School libraries, math

and science labs, and art and music rooms are top priorities in uncrowding schools, according to Sargent. After these uses, special programs, such as those for gifted students, can be housed, and audiovisual media centers can be established. Student personnel services and administrative offices can also be moved into a less-crowded school building.

Keep a Small School

Beyond the educational priorities for filling space in thinning schools, the best solution to surplus space may very well be simply to keep the school with a small student body. Especially in sparsely populated areas where closing a school would mean busing students long distances, the best alternative could be a modern version of the old one-room school house. It will cost something to keep a reasonable pupil-teacher ratio in isolated areas, to be sure. Coleman suggests, however, that the expenses of transportation and the inconvenience of being a long-distance bus rider may outweigh those costs. In an article addressing the problems of the elementary school with fewer than 150 pupils, he argues that "the reduction in quantity of education offered can allow boards to improve the quality, while holding costs stable."

Coleman says that the first problem faced in organizing a small school is "what constitutes a teachable group." He partially rejects the traditional grouping categories of age or grade level, ability, enriched or remedial programs, and handicap. Individual instruction, he says, is not aided by the first two; and the results of segregating children with special needs makes the latter two groupings questionable. For small school organization he favors grouping based on the personality "fit" between teacher and pupil. He cites research showing that such grouping improves grades and the satisfaction of pupils and teachers.

Coleman presents four models for organizing a 76-pupil, eight-grade elementary school with three full-time teachers and, in some models, a half-time teacher aide. Emphasized in all the models are a high level of individualized instruction,

cooperation among the teachers for team teaching and changing group activities, and some degree of adaptability in the structure of the building.

Share the Building

Classrooms vacated by a shrinking student body have been put to myriad uses. Almost any activity that does not interfere with the regular classes can be housed in the school building. Depending on the agreement, such use might produce revenues in rents or benefit the school educationally. A newsletter published by Educational Facilities Laboratories comments on several programs in Arlington, Virginia, using former school space for community services. When the city recreation department wanted to improve the offerings of a community center located in part of a school building, it built tennis courts nearby. Now the pupils have access to courts that they would not otherwise have.

Aside from some real benefits of multiple use, keeping a school open and viable can be a lifesaver for the district. If additional classroom space becomes necessary in a nearby school, the empty classrooms can be reclaimed for as long as need be. In Arlington, this was done when a nearby school needed extra space while it was being remodeled. The building that had been kept open for public school and community groups was available when no others were. Some of the groups were reshuffled or doubled up while former classrooms were once again being used for instruction.

The uses that have been either tried or suggested involve both public and private agencies, in and out of the education field. They include alternative schools, day-care centers, parochial schools, universities, health and social service agencies, museums and libraries, senior citizens programs, adult education programs, and so forth, depending on the needs and imagination of the community. This flexible, practical, and humanistic approach to facility use is best summarized by Joseph Ringers, Arlington school district assistant superintendent for finance and business management:

The key in all cases is to gain or maintain community values. Schools, after all, are more than educational institutions. They are community property and we in the school district must take the lead in finding ways in which our buildings can best serve their communities.

Lend, Lease, or Sell

The consensus among the writers on facility disposal is that selling a building outright is a less attractive solution than somehow keeping it under the control of the school system. After all, enrollment predictions can be faulty, and a ten-year projection may be incapable of accounting for unexpected population growth. If the building is well built, well designed, and fairly new and could not be replaced economically later on, it may be tempting to mothball it for a time, in case its neighborhood has potential for growth or recycled housing that would bring in young families. Vandalism and public criticism of the wasted space, however, are likely to result from that decision.

Another choice is to allow use by community groups or public agencies that might be strapped for space or might not otherwise have space available to them. Social groups, civic organizations, and local arts and theatre groups may welcome a chance to get out of members' living rooms and expand their operations if a school building were to become available.

Lending the building to another public agency may not be a complete financial disaster if the agency contracts to pay the school district to provide maintenance services. Preschool programs, Head Start, and other agencies are sometimes given use of the buildings, often with parents paying a fee on a sliding scale of financial ability. If kindergartens are not required by law, school boards sometimes vote them in and pay for them out of their own funds or on a pay-as-you-can basis.

Leasing the facility is the most popular arrangement for use outside the school system. Suggestions: Lease the school to a neighboring school district. Lease it to the city, county, or state for offices or for conversion into dormitories for detention or rehabilitation of juveniles or the handicapped.

Lease it to a college or university that needs more space for classrooms, offices, or dorms. As long as the building is owned by a public agency, a steering committee of local residents may be maintained to select activities for the building. By this means, it could be partially used by some public or private agencies and still be a community and cultural center under local control.

Selling an unused facility seems to be generally regarded as a last resort, though selling can be a financial coup if the building is located in an area zoned for commercial use. A special report, "What to Do If Shrinking Enrollment Forces You to Shut a School," states that Salt Lake City had to close 13 schools from 1965 to 1973 because their K-12 enrollment had dropped 25 percent since 1958. Good luck or prescient planning had located all the buildings in commercial areas. One school was sold to a church; three others went to state, county, and private agencies for office space; one became a motel; and most of the others were sold as well.

Where zoning is a problem, selling may be hard to do. Commercial buyers are limited, and most developers would find it uneconomical to tear down the buildings and put up new ones. Expensive school property sitting idle in a residential area is a real burden. The special report referred to in the preceding paragraph offers a suggestion: "Sell the central administration building if it has good commercial value and move the district offices to a vacant school." Interdistrict organizations can also help by allowing several districts to act in concert.

In general, the literature on the subject suggests that selling to a high bidder is fine if one can be found. Of course, a district may not be able to afford to sell an unpaid-for building in some cases. Leasing a facility is preferable because it keeps ownership in the school system, because potential lessees are more numerous than commercial buyers, and because it usually allows some measure of local influence on the uses of the building. The last consideration is especially important when the structure is located in a residential area.

CONCLUSION

The implications of declining enrollments are, taken negatively, that state revenues will abate, that school buildings will have to be closed, that teachers will have to be released, and that financial problems, irate parents, and attorneys for the teachers' union will hound the superintendent and the school board out of office. A survey of the literature shows, however, that this nightmarish version belongs on the dark side of the moon. The writers seem collectively to have taken a tip from the Chinese, whose alphabetical character for crisis also means opportunity.

An opportunity offers an inherent challenge. "Out of adversity," as Cronin states, "can come a richer, more varied leadership style." Taken positively, the implications of declining enrollments are that enterprising and creative school administrators will develop better programs as they condense them. They will devise equitable RIF policies with the teachers' unions and will become even more prominent as public leaders when they unite with community task forces to solve the problems of school closings.

Many districts will find the decreasing numbers in classes a blessing. Financially pressed school districts encourage the efforts of those who are currently exploring means of funding other than by school budget elections. Superintendents will be on call for their most dynamic and resourceful leadership. Principals will be more of a parents' friend in the school system than ever before. Humane and politic handling of local school closures will increase mutual understanding between the school district and the people.

The first duty of the professionals is to forecast enrollments as accurately as possible, using the best means available. The second is to begin planning long in advance of a school closure or major reorganization. Watchwords of successful management for the years of dwindling enrollment are

communication and *community participation*. Communication with teachers, pupils, parents, and anyone else whose interests are affected by the changes to come is crucial to any measure of success. Moreover, the participation of all those affected is essential. It will be necessary to glean their ideas and cooperation to be certain that decisions affecting the community are acceptable to the community.

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